Moctezuma's Revenge

Before the epidemics, Cortés was not a big threat to the Aztecs

In July 1520, Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) and his group of soldiers were holed up in one of Moctezuma's royal palaces in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire. They were under siege from a huge army of Aztec warriors.

Months earlier, the Aztec leader Moctezuma II (1466–1520) had reluctantly welcomed Cortés and his army into the city. Try as he might to bribe them with gifts and excuses to keep them away from the capital, they still came. Moctezuma was about forty-five years old and had ruled for seventeen years. In his time as ruler, he had expanded the Aztec empire to the south, conquering most of Oaxaca, and by 1519 he controlled most of central Mexico within a 300-kilometer radius of what is now Mexico City. One exception to this was the independent kingdom of Tlaxcala, southeast of Tenochtitlan between the capital and the Vera Cruz coast of the Gulf of Mexico. It was Cortés's good fortune to have come through Tlaxcala on his way inland. The Tlaxcalan rulers had courted the Spaniards, treating them well and hoping to make them allies against their Aztec enemies.

According to some historical accounts, Cortés's march from the coast to the capital was aided by some Aztec legends of a returning god, who would come from the east. Many modern scholars doubt this narrative as an after-the-fact narrative to account for Moctezuma hesitating to destroy Cortés's army earlier, and indeed it may have played some role in the Aztec's willingness to show Cortés a little more courtesy in the beginning. Cortés's march had certainly been made easier because he had meet an indigenous woman at one of their earlier stops in the Yucatan peninsula, on the way from Cuba to Mexico. She was called Malintzin (ca. 1501–ca. 1529) by the Nahuatl-speakers of central Mexico and Doña Marina by the Spaniards. She has come to be known by the name La Malinche. She was born to a high-ranking family in Veracruz, where Nahuatl was spoken, but was given in marriage to a Yucatecan noble in an area speaking more than one Maya language. She quickly became conversant in Spanish as well and was crucial to Cortés for her ability to translate these languages. Her family's position meant she also knew the formal, courtly register of the Nahuatl language, which allowed her to be taken more seriously by the Aztec elite. La Malinche has an exceedingly complex place in Mexican history because, willingly or not, she facilitated the Spanish conquest. She was an extraordinary woman caught up in a difficult and dangerous sequence of events. Doña Marina did not leave written records of her own and has been variously viewed by history as a turncoat, collaborator, hero, or just a person trying to survive in a time of deadly conflict. However, to be called a "malinchista" in Mexico is an insult, the equivalent of calling someone a traitor. With Cortés she had a son, Martín, and later married another Spanish nobleman.

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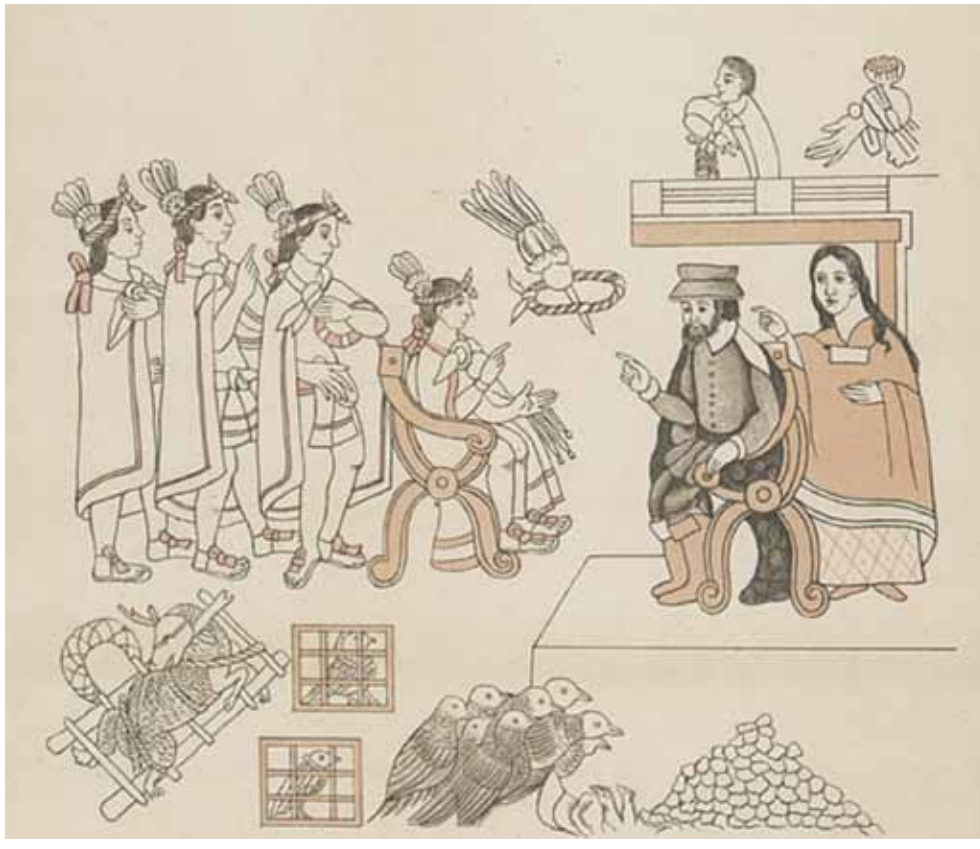
Sixteenth-century portrait of Hernán Cortés from the manuscript "Trachtenbuch" ("Book of Traditional Costumes") by Christoph Weiditz, in the Germanisches National Museum Library in Nuremberg

After making several stops around the coast of Yucatan, Cortés came as close as he could to the Mexican capital. He had his ships destroyed to limit the chances of mutiny or retreat. He had already overstepped his orders and was being chased by another group sent from Cuba to arrest him. His army marched inland with about 600 soldiers. They were also accompanied by many indigenous people who were either forced into service or came as allies against the Aztecs.

The conquistadors had some cannon and arquebuses with them, as well as crossbows and steel swords. The noise and smoke of the guns had a psychological impact on the indigenous people, but the weapons themselves did not make a



Cortés and La Malinche meeting Moctezuma II on November 8, 1519. The image is a segment from the "Lienzo de Tlaxcala," a mostly pictorial account of the "Conquest of Mexico" and of Tlaxcalan political structure, painted on a large cotton sheet by Tlaxcalan scribes. The text and images mix European and native styles and include anachronisms, such as the European-style chairs included in the image.

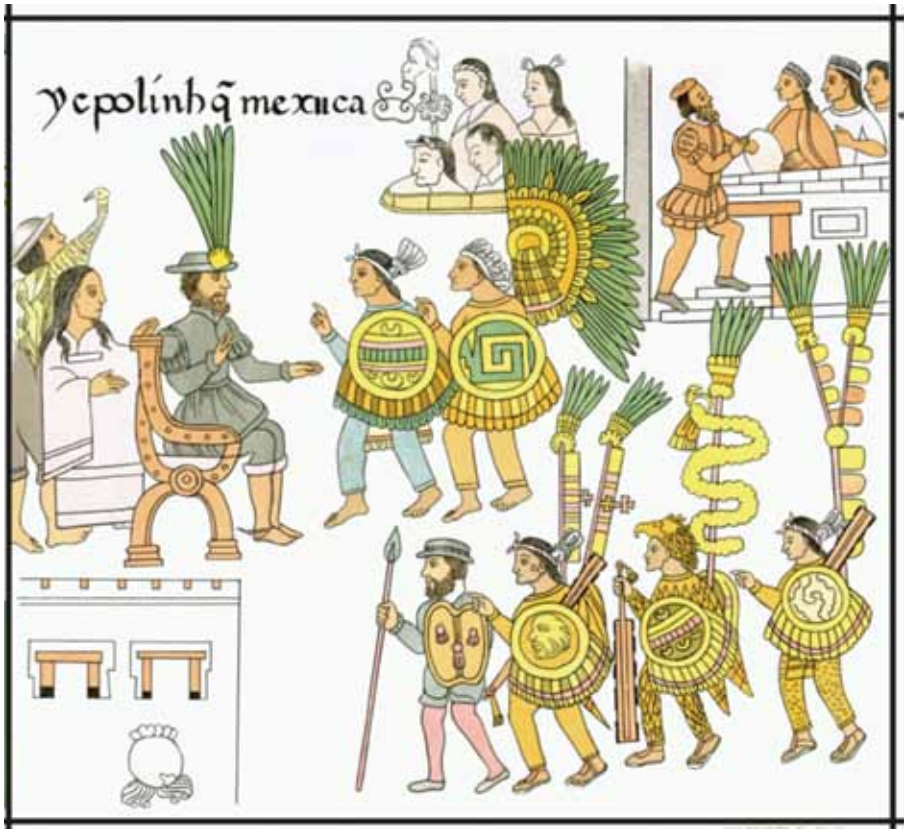
big difference in battles; they took a long time to reload, and often misfired. At several critical battles, they would not fire when needed, but would then go off minutes later, sometimes killing the people using them. The most devastating weapons the Spanish had were their warhorses. The closest thing to a horse in the Mexican world was a deer, barely a quarter the size of a horse.

Horses were gruesomely effective on open ground, where they could charge at high speed deep into the ranks of native soldiers, with their riders chopping at people with swords. But they were of less use in the sort of close-quarter fighting the Spaniards were to face in the cities.

What is notable about Cortés's encounter is how well the Mexicans and the Spanish understood each other. Their systems of social organization were very similar, with elite and commoner classes, and Cortés dealt exclusively with the nobility, even adopting the signs of high status, such as wearing brilliant green quetzal feathers in his hat. Their political organizations were also similar, with local and regional polities led by a hierarchy of rulers. Cortés could see exactly who his "opposite number" was in every town they came to, and his lieutenants understood who their corresponding equivalent was on the other side. The Spanish priests understood who the indigenous priests were, and the same was true of professional soldiers. Although they viewed one another suspiciously, there was no mystery in how the other's society worked.

This similarity and mutual understanding is remarkable when viewed in a larger context. The complex political societies of Europe and the Americas developed independently. When these two branches of humanity separated in Asia roughly 10,000 years ago, there were no complex societies anywhere on earth. There were just autonomous bands, living a hunting, gathering, early horticultural way of life. But run the clock forward to 1519 CE and the political structures that grew from these bands were practically identical: Both were led by a hereditary elite and reinforced by high-ranking administrators, bureaucrats, judges, religious specialists, and professional warriors. As in Spain, the whole Aztec political structure depended on hierarchical systems of taxation and tribute, with wealth flowing from a hinterland into a metropolitan capital. After the conquest, the Spanish installed Spaniards or allies in key positions in the Aztec bureaucratic structure, while largely leaving it intact. And for individual soldiers and leaders on both sides, their path to wealth and social status was through winning battles and conquering territory. When the Europeans arrived and began marching towards the Aztec capital, the groups they met along the way saw them not as creatures from another planet, but as potential allies against their Aztec adversaries. Cortés instantly recognized the political terrain, and began assembling a coalition of allies, all based on the fundamental human logic that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The meeting of Cortés and Moctezuma went reasonably well at first. Whoever these strangers were, Moctezuma would have preferred to have them as allies rather than enemies. It was clear that so small a force was no match for the Aztec army. The newcomers seemed to have a strange and insatiable need to acquire gold, which Moctezuma could supply. So he treated them



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Another segment from the "Lienzo de Tlaxcala," showing Cortés, wearing high-status quetzal feathers in his hat, as the eleventh and last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc, surrenders on August 13, 1521 (translation of text on the image: "Now the Mexica [Aztecs] were finished").

with courtesy and hoped they would become allies, vassals, or trading partners, or simply go away. Moctezuma finally met Cortés and his company on one of the straight causeways that led across Lake Texcoco into Mexico City. Moctezuma's procession was led by the princes of the major towns around the lake, all dressed in their finery. Finally, Moctezuma's sedan chair, one of "uncommon splendor," was brought in, carried by other high-ranking men. A canopy was held over his head, "decorated with green feathers, gold, silver, chalchihuis stones, and pearls." He was "sumptuously attired, had on a species of half boot, richly set with jewels, and whose soles were made of solid gold." His entourage spread fine white fabric on the ground, so his feet would not touch the earth, and no one looked at his face directly except for his four closest relatives. Through Doña Marina, he and Cortés inquired after each other's health, exchanged gifts, and went through several rounds of, "no, after you" regarding who should go first into the city. As two of Moctezuma's nephews led them to a palace prepared for their stay, the narrator of one account, the soldier Bernal Diaz del Castillo (ca, 1495–1584), observed, "innumerable crowds of canoes were plying everywhere around us; at regular distances we continually passed over new bridges, and before us lay the great city of Mexico in all its splendour." The Spaniards were awed by seeing the city "all built of massive stone and lime, rise[n] up out of the midst of the lake." The Europeans were not without a sense of foreboding entering the city: "[O]ur minds were still full of the warnings which the inhabitants of [cities they had passed through], with the caution they had given us not to expose our lives to the treachery of the Mexicans."

Tensions rose steadily over the seven months Cortés's army was in the city. Moctezuma was under tremendous pressure from his allies to be rid of these people. When he became more insistent that they leave, Cortés took Moctezuma hostage along with several of his allies and members of his family. This increased the rest of the nobility's contempt for Moctezuma. Eventually they deposed him, naming his brother Cuitláhuac (?–1520) in his place. The final straw was the Spaniards' insistence on building a Christian altar on top of one of the two principal temples in the capital, a public insult to the Aztec religion and the cadres of priests and nobles who supported it. As Bernal Diaz del Castillo remembered it, "From the very moment we had erected this altar and cross on the great temple, and had celebrated high mass there, a storm began to gather over our heads." Eventually, the Spaniards, fearing an uprising, massacred a large group of nobles at a festival. Their compound was then besieged by a huge army. Cortés tried to have Moctezuma speak to the crowd, but the Aztecs were furious with him and unleashed a great volley of spears, arrows, and rocks, striking him several times. Whether then or in Cortés's preparations for attempting to flee the city, Moctezuma was killed.

In desperation, after their first sortie was defeated, Cortés and his lieutenants decided to take all their remaining people and try to escape by night, to try to fight their way to the mainland or die in the attempt. When they had arrived in the city, and after gaining reinforcements from a second contingent, their company consisted of around 1,400 Spanish soldiers along with several Italians, Africans, Indians from Cuba, and around 2,000 Tlaxcalan warriors who had allied themselves with Cortés to fight the Aztecs. They still had around eighty horses, muskets, and a few small cannons. One night, they ran for it. They tried to take with them much of the gold they had gathered, loading down eight wounded horses and eighty of their Tlaxcalan

allies with as many gold bars as they could carry. That amounted to more than 3,000 pounds of gold. Almost none of it made it out of the city.

The Aztecs had removed the bridges over the many canals they had to cross, but Cortés's forces made a portable bridge that they dragged along with them, using it to negotiate the canals, until it fell apart. An Aztec account of the night described the scene: "When night had fallen and midnight came, the Spaniards came out, in compact formation, along with all of the Tlaxcalans. The Spaniards went ahead and the Tlaxcalans followed, covering the rear of the company like a protective wall." They were discovered and were attacked, with thousands of warriors coming by land and hundreds more by canoe. They were pursued and came to a wide canal, but their company surged forward, pushing hundreds of men and horses into the water. The Aztec account continues, "And when the Spaniards had arrived at Tlaltecayoacan, where the Toltec canal is, it was as though they had fallen off a precipice. They all fell, those of Tlaxcala, those of Tliliuhquitepec, and the Spaniards, and the horses, and some women. Soon the canal was completely full of them, full to the banks. But those who came at the rear just passed and crossed over on people, on bodies." The retreat continued until dawn, when they reached the end of the causeway. They were not seriously pursued until later, and the Aztecs may have been allowing the remnants of the army to escape. Of the roughly 3,400 in their company, over 2,900 were killed. Only 440 survived; they had lost all but twenty horses, almost all the gold, all their cannon and gunpowder; many of the survivors were wounded.

It was a year before Cortés tried again to conquer Tenochtitlan. In the meantime, a great smallpox epidemic raged across the empire, especially in the crowded cities. An estimated 40 percent of the population died in the 1519–20 wave of infections. Cuitláhuac and a great many of the leadership tier of the empire died in the plague. People all across the Aztec Empire and beyond died and the flow of tribute collapsed, causing famine in the capitals. Without the threat of Moctezuma's army, the subjugated kingdoms that made up the empire withdrew. The Aztec powerhouse of Moctuzema's reign, easily able to expel Cortés's battered army in 1520, no longer existed in 1521. In his second attempt, Cortés and his indigenous allies crushed and looted the city, finding thousands recently dead from smallpox and famine. The city's population would not recover to preconquest levels for 300 years.

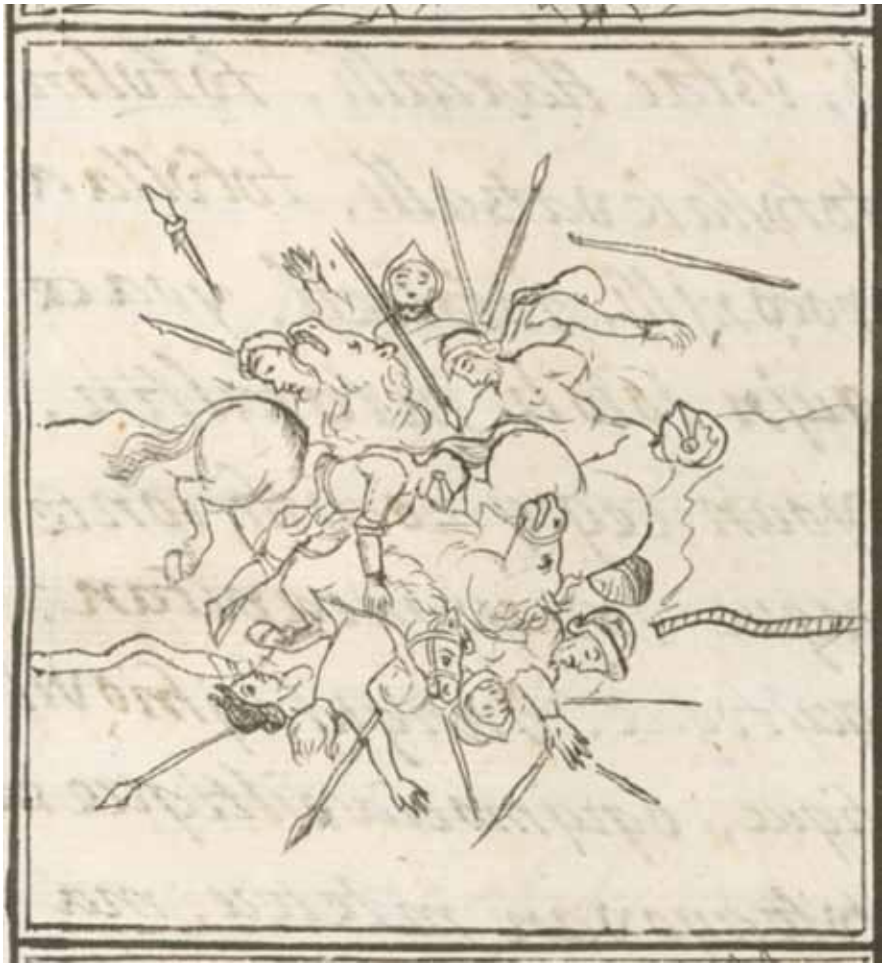

Image of Cortés and company fleeing Tenochtitlan, from the "Florentine Codex," a sixteenth-century document written by Aztec scribes under the supervision of the Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún.

Without the impact of European diseases, could the Spanish have conquered Mexico? Unlikely. The demographic collapse in Mexico was unprecedented; up to 80 percent of the indigenous population died between 1519 and 1580. Absent that, Europeans would have had to try to carve out a place for themselves within a political landscape of powerful and competitive city-states. Their less ambitious aim would likely have been to establish themselves as the trade link between Europe and Central America, as the Portuguese, Dutch, and British did along the coasts of India and China in the 1600s.

Samuel M. Wilson *is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Texas, author of* The Emperor's Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact, *and a contributing editor to* Natural History.